adoption & fostering

Article

Exploring the ethical implications of the late discovery of adoptive and donor-insemination offspring status

Adoption & Fostering
37(2) 171–187

DOI: 10.1177/0308575913490496
adoptionfostering.sagepub.com
SAGE

Helen Riley
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract
Some children adopted under the now discredited period of closed adoption were never told of their adoptive status until it was revealed to them in adulthood. Yet to date, this 'late-discovery' experience has received little research attention. Now a new generation of 'late discoverers' is emerging as a result of (heterosexual couple) donor insemination (DI) practices. This study of 25 late-discovery participants of either adoptive or (heterosexual couple) DI offspring status reveals ethical concerns particular to the lateness of discovery. Most of the participants were Australian, with the remainder from the UK, USA and Canada. All were asked to give an 'open' account of their experience, with four themes or suggestions provided on request. These accounts were added to those available in relevant publications. The analysis employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and all accounts were analysed using an ethical perspective developed by Walker (2006, 2007). The main themes that emerged were: disrupted personal autonomy, betrayal of deep levels of trust and feelings of injustice and diminished self-worth. The lack of recognition of concerns particular to late discovery has resulted in late discoverers (i) feeling unable to regain a sense of personal control, (ii) significantly disrupted relationships with those closest to them and others, including community and institutions, and (iii) feelings of diminished value and self-worth.

Keywords
late discovery, adult discovery, adoption, donor insemination (DI), ethics, secrecy

Introduction

During the 30-year period when secrecy and closed records were standard practice, many adoptees experienced family secrecy, denial of difference and the withholding of identity information. Information on their history was only usually revealed or exposed to them at

Corresponding author:
Helen Riley, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, 4510 Australia.
Email: helenr280@gmail.com

some time during their adult life. This phenomenon of late discovery[1] started emerging some 40 years ago, as the first generation of closed record adoptees reached adulthood, and is still unfolding today. But despite this, it has received little dedicated recognition, acknowledgment or research interest. While the late discovery of adoptive status can be expected to cease over coming decades, recent years have seen evidence that it is not only adopted people who experience adult discovery. A new generation of late discoverers – heterosexual couple donor insemination offspring – is coming to light.

In Australia the central feature of adoption practices from the 1950s up until the 1980s involved the severing of all genetic links between parent and child, and the creation of a new family unit based exclusively on social relationships. Adoption records were sealed and original birth certificates fictionalised to show only the adoptive parents' names (Delany, 1997, 2002; Marshall and McDonald, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, 1994). As evidence emerged that the practice of secrecy was leading to a range of psychological problems for many adoptees, there was mounting pressure to end it (Brodzinsky and Schechter, 1990; Kirk and McDaniel, 1984; Sorosky, Baran and Pannor, 1978; Triseliotis, 1973). In Australia, between 1984 and 1994, each state and territory introduced new legislation to support open access to identifying information. This recognised the child's right to some knowledge of her or his origins, ended secrecy and made records available to adults when they reached legal adult age. In some jurisdictions, however, certain vetoes on access to identifying information and/or contact for those adopted under the previous legislation still exist or continue to be permitted.

Despite the evidence of harm and the resulting legislative changes, little attention has been devoted to a particular consequence of denial of difference and secrecy in adoption: the experiences of those who were not told of their adoptive status and who discover this information as adults. The only piece of academic qualitative research on this experience is a social science study conducted in New South Wales by Perl and Markham (1999) on behalf of the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC).[2] Since then, Passmore, Foulstone and Feeney (2006) and Passmore, Feeney and Foulstone (2007) have raised similar concerns and Riley (2008, 2009) has shared initial findings from this study.[3]

Concurrent with the ending of closed adoption practices in Australia, heterosexual couple donor insemination (DI) began to expand significantly, spurred on by new scientific developments in reproductive technology. Medical supervision is used to ensure that donated sperm has been screened for diseases and that the procedure occurs at the optimal time to achieve pregnancy (Bennett, 2010). As a result, most donor-assisted insemination now takes place in regulated clinical settings and is controlled, in an ad-hoc manner, through a combination of legislation, guidelines and accreditation requirements (Bennett, 2010). Although DI has widespread support, it clearly remains a contentious practice, burdened with numerous problems and contradictions. Despite broad recognition by social scientists, psychologists and social workers that closed adoption practices involving secrecy and sealed records were flawed, donor-assisted conception has developed under an equally arcane regime. One major difference lies in the relatively unregulated nature of the practice compared to adoption. Currently, donor anonymity is banned and donor-conceived offspring can access identifying information (at legal adult age or earlier) in four Australian states. However, the right only applies to offspring conceived after the relevant legislative changes were enacted (New South Wales, 2007; South Australia since 1988, if all parties consent; Victoria, 1995; and Western Australia, 2004). The remaining states and territories are

required to adhere to National Health and Medical Research Centre (NHMRC) ethical guidelines and Reproductive Technology Accreditation Council (RTAC) requirements (The Senate, 2011). The Senate Inquiry Report into Donor Conception in Australia (2011) has criticised the lack of adherence to NHMRC ethical guidelines across these jurisdictions.

Studies undertaken so far clearly indicate that heterosexual couples using DI are much more likely than individuals or same-sex couples to conceal information from their child or children. This dynamic for secrecy can be attributed to a desire to protect the male partner and his family from the stigma of infertility (van den Akker, 2006; Blyth et al, 2001; Blyth and Farrand, 2004; Golombok et al, 2002; Gottlieb, Lalos and Lindblad, 2000; Grace, Daniels and Gillett, 2008; Jadva et al, 2009; Riggs and Scholz, 2011; Salter-Ling, Hunter and Glover, 2001).

While there is a growing body of research devoted to a range of concerns associated with donor-assisted conception practices, little of this explores late-discovery experiences and their implications. A literature search located only two studies focusing solely on the late-discovery experience. The first appeared in the UK, authored by Turner and Coyle (2000). The second, conducted as part of a Master's thesis, was published in book form by author and psychologist Lynne Spencer (2007). Other works that include late-discovery accounts, acknowledge late discovery or are self-published include Jadva et al (2009), Jamieson (2006), Lorbach (2003), McWhinnie (2006) and Whipp (2006). Recently, Blyth and colleagues (2012) have provided a critical analysis of the research evidence with regard to donor-conceived people's views and experiences of their genetic origins, and this includes recognition of the frequency of adult discovery and its effects.[4]

A review of new and existing late-discovery accounts across both adoption and heterosexual couple DI reveals marked commonalities between them. These are striking, despite significant differences between the two practices and the different socio-cultural eras in which they have operated. While claims for the existence of commonalities between adoption and donor conception practices have been contested by the fertility industry, by public figures such as Lord Robert Winston (2006) and by advocates of individual reproductive rights and bio-medical autonomy, others, including researchers and bio-ethicists, claim they are a reality (Benward and Asch, 2000; Blyth et al, 2001; Jadva et al, 2009; Rose, 2009; Somerville, 2004). Indeed, both practices have legally denied access to identifying genetic information and/or contact with biological kin.

In closed adoption children were legally prevented from contact with their biological parents and other relatives. In DI the mother is also the birth mother while the father (donor) remains legally anonymous (until legal adult age or not at all depending on the legislative status and year of birth in different jurisdictions). Both practices have been regarded as 'solutions' to the problem of infertility.

Closed adoption operated under the auspices of the social welfare system and was regarded as a 'perfect solution' to a social problem. It found homes for the supposedly 'unwanted' children of single mothers, while simultaneously providing children to couples experiencing infertility (Grotevant et al, 2000; Kirk and McDaniel, 1983; Marshall and McDonald, 2001). In contrast, donor conception remains firmly fixed within the medico-scientific field where it is, or has been, promoted as a 'cure' or 'solution' for infertility, despite its failure to resolve

infertility problems experienced by the male parenting partner. While the relinquishing mother was made to 'disappear' in adoption, in DI it is the father who has been 'encouraged' and 'facilitated' to retreat from sight (Blyth, 1998; Blyth et al, 2001; Haimes and Daniels, 1998a, b; Kass, 2002; Rose, 2009; Turner and Coyle, 2000). Thus, despite the differences, adoptees and DI offspring share much in common. They know they have been intentionally separated from all or part of their biological origins, they do not (or did not) know their background history and are (or were) prevented from accessing identifying information due to sealed records and fictionalised birth certificates.

Aim of this study

This study sets out to elucidate and explore the concerns specific to the lateness of discovery of adoptive and heterosexual couple DI offspring status. While late discovery of adoptive status can be expected to cease over coming decades, a new generation of late discoverers is now coming to light and can be expected to increase in numbers.

In order to improve our understanding of these complexities, this study (a) identifies and analyses the additional and particular ethical concerns arising from denial of difference, secrecy and lateness of discovery, and (b) contextualises these concerns within broader research. Those identified as being particular to late discovery encompass:

- disbelief at having been lied to for so long, by those closest to them, with associated disruption to their sense of personal autonomy;
- betrayal of deep levels of trust by those closest to them (usually parents) who kept the secret, a feeling that can spill over to relationships with others in the community, including institutions if they are seen to have participated in keeping the secret;
- a sense of injustice in not being awarded either equal consideration or value by those closest to them, nor equal access involving normative social practices, all of which can engender a sense of gross injustice.

This study scrutinises new and existing late-discovery accounts. Those already available had not been analysed from an ethical perspective and thus warranted inclusion to help construct a broader and deeper picture of the concerns specifically related to this experience and facilitate more effective healing for the people affected.

Existing accounts were drawn from the published works of Jamieson (2006), Lorbach (2003), Perl and Markham (1999), Spencer (2007), The Senate Inquiry into Donor Conception in Australia (2011), Turner and Coyle (2000) and Whipp (2006). The new accounts were gathered from 25 participants utilising a critical hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This was selected for its ability to empower participants and elicit their most important concerns. It offered recognition and acknowledgement of the particularity of their experiences, the lack of which is a feature of many late-discovery accounts. It utilised an open invitation method of recruitment that sought to ensure that each participant would write about her or his experiences in their own way and on the topics they considered most important to them.

This study drew its ethical perspective from the theoretical work of feminist philosopher Margaret Urban Walker and in particular, her expressive and collaborative conception of morality as outlined in *Moral Understandings: A feminist study in ethics* (2007) and *Moral*

Repair (2006). It utilised this conception and, more specifically, Walker's ethics of identity, to consider the impact of secrecy and denial of difference on adults who discovered the truth of their genetic origins in adulthood. Further, it considered a range of concerns and identified some of the ways in which late-discovery identities may have been disrupted, as revealed through personal accounts. There is a particular emphasis on personal autonomy, and how this may have been disturbed through the denial of difference and secrecy, along with the issue of betrayal of trust and whether the ability to trust has been affected, and if so, in what ways. Finally, it considers the longer-term impact that secrecy and the denial of difference can have in engendering feelings of injustice and loss of life meaning.

Materials and methods

Sample and recruitment

Twenty-five new accounts met the criteria for acceptance into the study, 20 of which were from late discoverers of adoptive status and five from late discoverers of DI offspring status. Fifteen participants were female and 10 male. Eighteen participants were Australian, two came from the UK, four from the US and one from Canada. Of the 20 late discoverers who had been adopted, 11 were female and nine male. Of the five late discoverers of DI status, four were female and one male. The ages at the time of discovery ranged from 18 years to 61 years. The number of years elapsed since discovery until the account was received ranged from one to 40 years.

As explained, a decision was taken also to include a number of existing published accounts, as these had not previously been analysed in this way. Excerpts from eight late-discovery adoptees were drawn from Perl and Markham (1999) and 15 from accounts by six late-discovery DI offspring from Spencer (2007). No names were allocated to the participant accounts in that study, so it is not possible to determine how many separate individuals are speaking. Quotations from two DI offspring accounts were drawn from Lorbach (2003) and five from Turner and Coyle (2000). Excerpts from five submissions by DI offspring to the Senate Inquiry into Donor Conception in Australia (2011) were also used. Finally, excerpts were drawn from the accounts of late-discovery DI offspring by Jamieson (2006) and Whipp (2006). As the research sought to reveal the shared ethical concerns located in late discovery, and was not a qualitative study incorporating quantitative methods in order to achieve generalisability or quantify differences or exceptions, the inclusion of the existing published accounts did not compromise the study but rather enriched it.

As this study involved research with human participants, a University Level 2 (Expedited) Ethical Review was sought and approved. An innovative strategy with four tactics/elements was then developed to recruit participants in a manner that would be empowering to them. This was felt necessary because of the sensitivity of the topic, the need to use different and innovative methods to reach disparate individuals and groups, the dearth of research featuring standard methods of recruitment and the lack of recognition awarded to the experience of late discoverers. The four tactics/elements included media, a specially designed web page and requests for assistance to adoption and donor conception networks in Australia and overseas. All participants were asked simply to provide a written account of their experience. For some, this request proved sufficient but others sought confirmation

that they were completely free to write what they wished. Guidelines were limited to four suggestions:

- Do you remember what your immediate feelings were when you found out you were adopted or conceived through gamete donation?
- Have your feelings changed or evolved over time?
- Can you tell me about these feelings and changes?
- Has this knowledge affected your relationships with those closest to you?

For those who were contacted through the Late Discovery Identities web page the guidelines were provided on the site.

The use of an open invitation resulted in some participants writing at length, while other contributions were no more than half a page. Some wrote in great detail about their experience, others concentrated on only one or two areas of particular concern to them. As participants had discovered the secret at different ages, and for some many years had passed since discovery, these timescales were often reflected in their accounts. Certainly, these differences determined what each person considered to be most important at the time of taking part in the study.

Contact with participants occurred in several ways. A few got in touch with the author via email arising from media publicity and the various requests sent to support organisations, and two accounts were received by both email and postal delivery. All accounts were printed out and/or transcribed and kept in a secure store protected by a database password. However, the majority of participants provided their accounts online. For this reason, the fact of the respondent contacting the author via email through the especially created Late Discovery Identities website was specified and accepted as proof of consent to take part. This website also contained a participant information sheet and a consent form. Participants were assured of anonymity (if desired) and confidentiality. All were advised that the researcher was a late discoverer of adoptive status, and that additional information about the late-discovery experience and details about support services could be provided upon request. Several participants did request information about support groups and/or to be directed to further reading. All participation was voluntary and unpaid.

Analysis and evaluation

The combined accounts were qualitatively analysed using an approach drawn from the critical hermeneutic phenomenological tradition (Angen, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2009; Lopez and Willis, 2004; Schwandt, 2007), described as 'research oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the ''texts'' of life (hermeneutics)' (van Manen, cited in Creswell, 2007: 59). Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology involves the dynamic interplay of various research activities. He does not offer a set of rules and methods, but encourages researchers to be responsible for developing their own approach.

This empowering and transformative approach is supported by the work of three feminist philosophers who have written extensively on trauma and identity. Brison (1997) asserts that trauma survivors need to survive to tell their story, but they also need to tell their story in order to survive, and that understanding trauma requires others to take first-person

narratives seriously as an essential epistemological tool. Nelson (2001) identifies the development of a counter story by those who have been oppressed as the claiming of an alternate moral space. People who have experienced trauma or oppression must engage in finding or establishing a new 'chosen' community where they can begin to move from a 'backward-looking story', which explains who they have been, to a 'forward-looking' one which shows them where they want to go (Nelson, 2001: 16). Stories of resistance attempt to replace an oppressed identity with one that commands respect. Walker (2006, 2007) describes the conditions necessary for transformation following trauma as 'voice', 'validation' and 'vindication'. Voice involves being able to tell and to have others listen to the truth of what they have endured. Validation entails others acknowledging the wrong that has occurred and affirming their entitlement to repair. Lastly, action taken by others to redress injustice becomes vindicating.

As late discoverers of adoptive or DI offspring status have received little acknowledgment of the additional concerns particular to their experience, these voices have not previously been analysed from a perspective that is concerned with (a) the specificity of their experiences, and (b) offering empowering recognition. Thus, the aim of this study was to *empower* participants, as existing research reveals that many late discoverers are demanding recognition and some lacked trust in researchers (Jamieson, 2006; Lorbach, 2003; Perl and Markham, 1999; Spencer, 2007; Turner and Coyle, 2000; Whipp, 2006). Therefore, rather than utilising sets of rules and methods employing highly structured elicitation devices, such as questionnaires or systematic observation schedules (Hammersley, 2006: 134), critical hermeneutics encourages researchers to be responsible for developing their own approach. The object is to make visible the lived experiences and voices of persons who are not members of privileged groups and whose voices are often discounted or overlooked (Lopez and Willis, 2004: 730).

A three-tiered literature review was conducted across relevant databases. The first and most important tier concentrated on locating existing research focused solely on the late discovery of adoptive or DI offspring status. The second focused on locating any ethical analysis of late-discovery experiences and the third looked for research that included late-discovery experiences and any published accounts by late discoverers themselves. Participants were provided with: (i) a biographical statement that explained the author's interest in the topic, including her status as a late-discovery adopted person; (ii) a substantial review of the pertinent literature and legislation together with a critical analysis of the dominant 'impoverishing' moral paradigm; and (iii) the provision of an alternative 'enriching' ethical conception (Walker's 'expressive and collaborative conception of morality') as an evaluative, analytical and transformative tool, thus fulfilling the requirements of a critical hermeneutic approach (Angen, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Gray, 2009; Lopez and Willis, 2004; Schwandt, 2007).

Clarifications and limitations

The focus on late discovery of heterosexual couple DI offspring status does not mean that secrecy and denial of difference cannot occur in other forms of donor conception, for instance that involving individuals or lesbian couples, and the author acknowledges that many differences can be found among and between individuals. These include differences between the two practices themselves and variables such as age, gender, age at discovery, length of time since discovery, method of discovery, geographic location, barriers to

obtaining identifying information and socio-economic and ethnic status, to name the most obvious. While acknowledging that these differences exist, the purpose of the study is to reveal the shared aspects of their experiences using an ethical framework.

Emergent themes

Disrupted personal autonomy

An analysis of the late-discovery accounts in this study reveals a broad range of discovery experiences. Some late discoverers found out relatively soon after reaching adulthood, others much later. Some were told by family under duress, some found out by accident or following the death of a parent, some were contacted through a government agency to inform them that their birth mother (or other) wished to contact them, some were told insensitively, and others were told in order to wound or cause harm. Adoptee Felicity remembers feeling:

> absolutely devastated . . . It's hard to explain . . . I was sad, confused, angry, relieved, emotional, bitter, afraid, and an immense feeling of loneliness and rejection and feeling not important and perhaps a feeling of insignificance.

Cameron found out about his adoption accidentally, following the death of both parents. He experienced grief and shock:

> I was pretty much numb . . . I felt very little . . . I remember walking around in a daze for quite a while not knowing what to feel . . . what I was 'supposed' to feel . . . I basically ignored it, as no big deal, for about 10 years before I had a mid-life crisis breakdown and began therapy . . .

Similarly, adoptee Tessa was:

> . . . shocked, but [I] had a great need to tell my adoptive mother it was OK, because I was worried about her . . . Then I just got angry . . . It was like feeling shock, concern, sadness, anger – it was a process of feelings. (Perl and Markham, 1999: 14)

Discovery also exposes the ways in which the secret has influenced the content and direction of their lives. Barbara was five months pregnant when her mother finally revealed the truth of her adoptive status:

> I ran from home to a family friend who gave me even more news, that I was the only one who didn't know . . . Yes, local shopkeepers, neighbours, school friends and just about anyone who knew us was aware of this 'secret' . . . All, of course, except my husband of six years who my parents discussed later as being only left in the dark because they felt he may have told me. (They had thought of telling him on our wedding day.) . . . Questions were asked, however Mum and Dad were unwilling to discuss any detail . . . Confused is not the word; 'alone' is what I felt.

Jenny, also adopted, felt somewhat differently due to exceptional personal circumstances:

> Happiness. I was a victim of child abuse, severe child abuse and there was a sense of relief that I wasn't blood related.

Despite this happiness Jenny expressed resentment that this secret had controlled her range of possible responses:

> I also felt resentful because if I had known from the beginning I would have walked away at the age of 16. (Perl and Markham, 1999: 15)

Contemporary theories on identity construction recognise the process of self-making as a balancing act involving normative socio-cultural frameworks. This 'balancing' creates a conviction of autonomy – that each individual has a will of their own, a certain freedom of choice and a range of possibilities for future engagement. Nonetheless, this conviction of personal autonomy and free will must also be accompanied by and framed within a commitment to a world of others. This world is composed of commitments to friends and family, to normative socio-cultural frameworks, to past relationships and decisions, and to a future relational and socio-cultural life. In this way, both personal autonomy and free will are constrained. Indeed, it is argued that individuals are unable to live without both autonomy and commitment, and individual lives and narratives of identity must constantly strive to balance the two. In the process of making each other accountable, the scope and limits of personal autonomy are defined, affirming who we are, what we care about and who has the right to judge and blame us (Bruner, 2003; Walker, 2007).

Late-discovery accounts reveal disruption to the sense of autonomy necessary for normative socio-cultural competence and self-worth. People's view of themselves as autonomous beings in control of their own lives is exposed as a lie, manipulated and controlled by others through secrecy, denial of difference and inaccessible records. Imber-Black (1993, 1999) describes secrets of this type and the undercurrents they produce in families as 'systemic phenomena'. They prohibit conversation in many areas and seriously weaken a family's ability to solve problems or to confront normal developmental issues. In late discovery, when a sense of difference had been felt even before the secret was known, these systemic phenomena are exposed. DI offspring Christine described this dynamic of secrecy within her family as a 'tense aura . . . of ''something-is going-to-happen''' and a 'feeling of separateness' (Whipp, 2006: 15). Further, she felt that:

> Something was not quite right . . . and that . . . everything sad or bad that had happened in my life was my fault. (Whipp, 2006: 16)

Similarly, DI offspring Louise revealed:

> I never suspected a family secret . . . Yet I did live in fear of somehow being 'found out' . . . I was convinced my mother knew something terrible about me which she could see, but which she did not tell me . . . I assumed it was some heinous character flaw. (Jamieson, 2006: 33)

When secrets are kept in families a complicated family geometry can develop, as revealed in many late-discovery accounts. Adult caregivers are forced to accentuate a 'receptive, dependent mode' of learning at the expense of an 'open, interrogative stance', and this can place the child in a vulnerable position. Questions are answered with evasions, half-truths and even lies. Open, interrogative conversation is suppressed while acceptance and dependency are accentuated (Dunne, 1996: 145). Adoptee Rosemary remembered:

> Growing up I always felt there was something [missing] but a story was always fabricated to answer my questions . . . Looking back now I know that everybody knew and those that didn't I was basically hidden from as I don't resemble my parents . . . They wouldn't have to answer questions . . . I just stopped asking.

While DI offspring Heather noted:

> [Late discovery] actually answered many questions that I had simply shrugged off in the past . . . whenever I would attempt to find family similarities with my father and his side of the

> family, my parents would give me polite smiles with nods and averted eyes. The subject was quickly changed or re-directed.

And adoptee Cameron revealed:

> So much of my life now makes sense . . . During childhood, even without knowing I was adopted, I 'knew' something was very wrong with the picture I was living in . . . something was definitely not right . . . So, as children usually do, I internalised the 'wrong' and made it about me . . . I didn't direct it outwards towards my environment and the adults in my life – I believed something was inherently wrong and flawed with me, not others.

While many families go to extraordinary lengths to conceal information, they simultaneously have often told others, sometimes many others, and this is reflected in the accounts in this study (Golombok et al, 2002; Gottlieb, Lalos and Lindblad, 2000; Grace, Daniels and Gillett, 2008; Lasker, 1998; Salter-Ling, Hunter and Glover, 2001). When a secret is known by many but kept from a few, the levels of distortion and mystification of communication processes must be significant and can even be toxic (Goodall Jr, 2005; Imber-Black, 1993, 1999). For some late discoverers, others have used this information insensitively, as a threat or to wound. Following the death of his parents, adoptee Peter sent requests to several family members looking for genealogical history, as his father would never discuss the matter with him:

> I finally received a message from a distant relative whom I had never met, and still have not . . . I can still recall the moment the email appeared on the screen and his words telling me he didn't mean to intrude but asking me if I knew I was adopted.

Adoptee Louise relates:

> . . . the revelation of my adoption occurred when I was 40 years of age . . . It was delivered to me by my husband after he had left the marriage, and having kept this knowledge a secret from me during the 12 years of our marriage.

Brenda, also adopted, recorded feeling:

> absolute disbelief, let down, lied to . . . I had been mistrusted by not being told the truth and had spent my life living a lie . . . the whole 'family' was aware that I was an adopted person, but no one had bothered to inform me, which was perhaps the greatest hurt of all.

Secrecy and the denial of difference has placed these late discoverers in positions of vulnerability, covertly controlling the choices and actions they have taken or not taken throughout their lives. As one DI offspring commented:

> This dynamic in families . . . that it's OK to lie, and so the doctor is in on the lie, the nurse or secretary is in on the lie, the parents are in on the lie, the donor is probably in on the lie. It's a lie. It's stealing. It's injustice, unfairness. We've been robbed . . . I mean the whole thing was the loyalty to the lie. The devotion to this dishonesty was enormous. It's above everything. (Spencer, 2007: 29)

Betrayal of trust

Loss of trust figures prominently in late-discovery accounts. As the closest and most long-standing relationships – and the parenting relationship in particular – engage the deepest levels of trust, they also demand and expect the highest degree of integrity. In the parent–child relationship, Walker (2007) names this attachment 'dependency-in-fact'. This term

acknowledges the vulnerability of the child and the specific responsibility of the parent in that relationship. When such significant relationships of trust prove unreliable and lacking in integrity, as revealed through late discovery, a dissonance can occur, leading to hypervigilance and a heightened awareness of personal vulnerability. This can affect the ability of late discoverers to rebuild trust in existing relationships and also build it in new ones.

Adoptee Karla felt the impact on her ability to trust others and especially her adoptive mother:

> I didn't trust anything she told me because she had lied about something so big for so long. I saw this lie as a way of manipulating and isolating me my whole life.

Adoptee Peter's ability to trust had also been challenged:

> [I have] spent the last 10 years in shock, anger, and have severed all ties with that part of my family.

Jacqui, another late discoverer of adoption, noted:

> I'm distant from Mum and Dad. I'm cranky at Dad for letting Mum keep it a secret. I never ring them, they ring me. I don't want to get emotionally involved. I've blocked them out. (Perl and Markham, 1999: 17)

One DI offspring stated:

> It really screwed my head up. Trying to put my life together . . . It would just eat me up inside . . . What kind of world is this? It made me so angry. (Spencer, 2007: 46)

Initially, Doug felt that he hadn't been affected by finding out he was adopted until:

> I had a great career future and many, many friends. About a year after discovery, however, I had the urge to leave . . . home, gave [my] notice and despite many attempts to get me to stay, [I] . . . had to go . . . I left Adelaide and I went to live in Sydney and I left all of my friends and I just went where I knew no one and started a new life.

Brison (1997: 17–21) describes the harms encountered through a violation of trust as including cognitive and emotional paralysis, a loss of one's memories of an earlier life, an inability to envision a future, and being left with no bearings by which to navigate. The sense of betrayal and the loss of trust experienced by the late discoverers in this study reveal that their relationships with others and their ability to trust into the future have been affected. What should their relationship be with others who had helped keep the secret? Further, what about those who only now are learning that a secret exists? How will they react?

DI offspring Heather noted:

> [Late discovery] had a profound effect on me, but possibly even more so the fact that this was not just kept secret from me but from everyone else in the family as well. Would my family feel differently about me if they knew who I wasn't anymore? How could they not?

Adoptee Felicity wrote of the loss of closeness with family and particularly her mother:

> My relationship with my mother is definitely strained as she chooses never to mention the subject or perhaps it is too difficult for her to talk about . . . I have lost that closeness I once had, not with all of them, but I feel it and I think they do, especially my mother; as hard as I try not to let it influence my feelings for her it just does and it is out of my control.

Regarding the ability to maintain and build relationships into the future, Barbara, also adopted, believes that relationships are now the most difficult aspect of her being:

> Years of 'walking away' when challenged . . . Always on guard when in company but confident and carefree when people are not important or don't matter to me.

But this loss of trust is not confined to personal relationships. Late discoverers can also lose their belief in their community and institutions who have helped keep the secret. One DI offspring wrote:

> He [a clinic doctor] said something that just really, really hurt hard . . . it was that he felt it was very important to never tell the child . . . That made me extremely angry. (Spencer, 2007: 29)

Adoptee Karla commented:

> [I] became obsessed with the unfairness of state-sanctioned laws that prevented me from access to my original birth certificate – and that allowed my family to feel justified in perpetuating this lie against me . . . I was appalled that state laws deprived me of access to them.

Injustice and self-worth

Linked to disrupted personal autonomy and betrayal of trust is the disruption late discoverers feel when they realise they have been denied participation in and access to sociocultural normative standards and values. For late discoverers, power rested with those who kept the secret, whether family, friends, community or institutions, and was withheld from them. This power imbalance undermines the need we all have to be regarded with respect and as beings of equal value, particularly by those we deem worthy of our own regard and respect (Brison, 1997; Bruner, 2003; Nelson, 2001; Walker, 2006, 2007). Late discoverers acknowledge the strong feelings involved. They express feelings of frustration that information available to others was withheld from them and continues, in some cases, to be so. Adoptee John noted:

> My anger at the system that told me that I couldn't find my family name was so intense that for some time, I never got past it . . . It was really too painful to think about too much – so I avoided the subject.

DI offspring Kimberley found out about her origins when she was 21. She related the enormous sense of loss that followed:

> [I was] faced with the shattering news that I had no rights to access information about my own family in order to re-piece my identity . . . I cannot fathom going through life never knowing where I have come from, my ancestry and my identity . . . I search for similarities in [other] faces, but will I ever know for sure? I know I have more family out there somewhere and I mourn the loss of them every day. (The Senate, 2011: Submission 52)

In the beginning, Lauren also knew little about the laws governing her situation as a DI offspring:

> I knew enough to know the law gave me no protection and I was held liable to a promise of anonymity that I had never agreed to . . . As my awareness of the legal situation increased, so did my sense of injustice . . . I found it incredibly frustrating. (The Senate, 2011: Submission 40)

Finally, adoptee Karla argued that:

> It's simply wrong that people would be deprived of profound self-knowledge in such an organised and socially approved way by the people who are supposed to love them most [their parents]... [I felt] profoundly betrayed... the brunt of a 40-year joke... like... Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*.

These late discoverers have experienced diminished recognition and acknowledgment. Personally, those closest to them and in the highest relationships of trust have perpetuated a lie and withheld important information from them throughout their lives. In the communal and institutional spheres, their birth certificates have been fictionalised, they have been denied access to records available to others as part of normal social practice, and faced a lack of understanding and even hostility from yet others concerning their need for identifying information. The persistent belittling or denial of attempts to regain control and personal autonomy undermine our human need to be seen as beings of equal value and consideration – personally, communally or institutionally (Walker, 2006: 64). When confidence in shared understandings and normative socio-cultural expectations is undermined, so too can be hope in the future.

Adoptee Cameron encapsulated this disruption when he asserted:

> ... it's exceptionally difficult to live an authentic life and create true loving relationships when your foundation is grounded in secrets, lies and misinformation about yourself and those you place your trust in. You are at a great emotional and psychological disadvantage.

Summary

This study reveals three shared themes in the late-discovery accounts across both adoption and heterosexual couple donor insemination practices. These involve disruption to personal autonomy, betrayal of deep levels of trust and feelings of injustice and diminished self-worth. Further, they reveal that late discoverers perceive a lack of recognition and acknowledgment of the concerns particular to this experience.

The first theme exposes the way in which personal autonomy has been disrupted or compromised. Late-discovery accounts lay bare the immediate and continuing anger and frustration being felt regarding the ways in which their lives have been controlled and managed by others. They have faced a lack of understanding or even hostility from family and friends and/or an inability to access records for a variety of reasons. Some have been rejected by their biological kin when contact was attempted, or have faced even more lies and deception. In some cases these feelings of shock, anger, fear, loss and despair became entrenched when their attempts to move past secrecy and gain a sense of personal control were thwarted or denied to them.

The second theme concerns the significance and weight that late discoverers place on trust in their accounts. This suggests that this experience involves the betrayal of the deepest levels of trust necessary for maintaining a cohesive identity. For some, the level of disruption experienced has been sufficient to cause shattering and long-lasting rifts in their relationships with those closest to them, sometimes leaving them without significant attachment figures to turn to. This rupture can continue to damage existing relationships and the ability to build successful relationships with new others in the future. This negative influence can also affect the

ability to trust and respect community organisations and institutions, particularly those which have participated in keeping the secret.

The third theme relates to the feelings of injustice being expressed by late discoverers. They believe they have not been treated the same as others, or offered the same consideration or protections. Their closest family members have withheld information from them and denied them equal access to normative socio-cultural standards and values. The late-discovery experience reveals that these norms – equality of opportunity, openness, honesty, integrity, mutual responsibility and accountability – were not offered or awarded to them. The lack of recognition and acknowledgment of their particular experiences continues and supports this perception, and undermines the possibilities for effective healing repair.

Discussion

The apparently simple act of recognition of a phenomenon is a precondition to any analysis and critique of it. It is also a precondition for healing for those affected (Brison, 1997; Nelson, 2001; Walker, 2006, 2007). The conditions necessary for healing following a traumatic event or events are described by Walker (2006) as 'voice', 'validation' and 'vindication'. Voice entails being able to tell and to have others listen to the truth of what they have endured. Validation involves others acknowledging the wrong that has occurred and affirming their entitlement to repair. Both voice and validation require that the person affected is not only offered the opportunity to be heard, but also that the specificity of their concerns should be acknowledged. Lastly, action taken by others to redress past and ongoing injustices becomes vindicating. Relationships with those who have not understood the implications of the late-discovery experience for their loved one, family member or friend may be improved or repaired through education and public recognition of their concerns. Trust in community and institutions can be improved through changes in attitudes and facilitated by reforms to practices that continue to conceal information and facilitate secrecy.

The lack of recognition or acknowledgement of the concerns particular to the lateness of discovery in adoption and heterosexual couple donor insemination has inhibited the ability of many late discoverers to effect deep and long-lasting healing repair. Adoption and donor-assisted conception communities, support and counselling organisations and institutions need to explore specific strategies of support for individual late discoverers (and as a group) and to recognise the wider ripple effects that flow from this experience to relational, communal and institutional spheres.

Notes

1. 'Late discovery' is a term first used by late discovery adoptee Ron Morgan, who set up an online late discovery adoption email list in 1995 (see http://groups.yahoo.com/group/LateDiscovery).
2. Perl and Markham's study sourced participants from the membership records of Australia's PARC (Post Adoption Resource Centre). Based on this they estimated that the numbers of late discoverers of adoptive status lie somewhere between 1% and 9% of those adopted over the approximately 30-year period when secrecy and closed records were standard practice. A mid-range estimate of 5% suggests that as many as 10,000 adoptees may have discovered this information as adults, or still remain unaware of their status.
3. Recent evidence based on an Australia-wide study has now emerged, which has allowed a firm estimate on the number of late discoverers of adoptive status in Australia to be determined for the first time. This figure – 11% of the total number of persons adopted in closed records period –

equates to approximately 25,000 to 30,000 individuals (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2012).

4. A recent Senate Inquiry into donor conception practices in Australia (2011) estimates the total number of children conceived in Australia in this way as being between 20,000 and 60,000, of whom approximately two-thirds were born using donor sperm. Although it is impossible to estimate how many of these children have had this information withheld from them, and who may have discovered their origins as adults, an estimate of 5%, as a median figure once again, means that between 500 and 2500 sperm donor offspring in Australia may have discovered the truth of their origins, as adults. However, the Senate report notes that other estimates suggest that there are in excess of 60,000 donor-conceived individuals in the country (this figure represents both sperm and egg donation births), and this figure would in turn increase the estimated number of late discoverers.

References

Angen MJ (2000) Evaluating interpretive inquiry: reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialogue. *Qualitative Health Research* 10(3): 378–395.

Australian Institute of Family Studies (2012) *National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices*, Research Report No. 21, Australian Government, Canberra.

Bennett B (2010) Assisted reproductive technology. In: White B, McDonald F and Willmott L (eds) *Health Law in Australia*. Pyrmont, NSW: Thompson Reuters (Professional) Australia Ltd.

Benward J and Asch A (2000) *A Case for Cross-fertilization: Adoption and the reproductive technologies*. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: Summary, Anaheim Conference Workshops, Anaheim. New York: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Blyth E (1998) Donor assisted conception and donor offspring rights to genetic origins information. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 6(3): 237–253.

Blyth E and Farrand A (2004) Anonymity in donor-assisted conception and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 12(2): 89–104.

Blyth E, Crawshaw M, Frith L and Jones C (2012) Donor-conceived people's views and experiences of their genetic origins: a critical analysis of the research evidence. *Journal of Law and Medicine* 19(4): 769–789.

Blyth E, Crawshaw M, Haase J and Speirs J (2001) The implications of adoption for donor offspring following donor-assisted conception. *Child & Family Social Work* 6(4): 295–304.

Brison SJ (1997) Outliving oneself: trauma, memory, and personal identity. In: Meyers DT (ed) *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Brodzinsky D and Schechter MD (1990) *The Psychology of Adoption*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bruner JS (2003) Self-making narratives. In: Fivush R and Haden C (eds) *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and cultural perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Creswell JW (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications.

Delany D (1997) Understanding adoption: epistemological implications. In: *Adoption and healing: proceedings of the International Conference on Adoption and Healing*. Wellington: New Zealand Adoption Education and Healing Trust.

Delany D (2002) *Adoption: A critical analysis challenging the dominant discourses*. Social Science doctoral thesis, Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia.

Dunne J (1996) Beyond sovereignty and deconstruction: the storied self. In: Kearney R (ed) *Paul Ricoeur: The hermeneutics of action*. London: Sage Publications.

Golombok S, Brewaeys A, Giavazzi MT, Guerra D, MacCallum F and Rust J (2002) Ethics and society: the European study of assisted reproduction families: the transition to adolescence. *Human Reproduction* 17(3): 830–840.

Goodall HL Jr (2005) Narrative inheritance: a nuclear family with toxic secrets. *Qualitative Inquiry* 11(4): 492–513.

Gottlieb C, Lalos O and Lindbad F (2000) Disclosure of donor insemination to the child: the impact of Swedish legislation on couples' attitudes. *Human Reproduction* 15: 2052–2056.

Grace VM, Daniels KR and Gillett W (2008) The donor, the father, and the imaginary constitution of the family: parents' constructions in the case of donor insemination. *Social Science and Medicine* 66(2): 301–314.

Gray DE (2009) *Doing Research in the Real World*. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications.

Grotevant HD, Dunbar N, Kohler JK and Lash Esau AM (2000) Adoptive identity: how contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations* 49(4): 379–387.

Haimes E and Daniels K (1998a) Concluding comments. In: Daniels K and Haimes E (eds) *Donor Insemination: International social science perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haimes E and Daniels K (1998b) International social science perspectives on donor insemination: an introduction. In: Daniels K and Haimes E (eds) *Donor Insemination: International social science perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hammersley M (2006) Hermeneutics. In: Jupp V (ed) *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Imber-Black E (1993) Secrets in families and family therapy: an overview. In: Imber-Black E (ed) *Secrets in Families and Family Therapy*. New York: WW Norton.

Imber-Black E (1999) *The Secret Life of Families: Making decisions about secrets: when keeping secrets can harm you, when keeping secrets can heal you – and how to know the difference*. New York: Bantam Books.

Jadva V, Freeman T, Kramer W and Golombok S (2009) The experiences of adolescents and adults conceived by sperm donation: comparisons by age of disclosure and family type. *Human Reproduction* 24(8): 1909–1919.

Jamieson L (2006) The DI journey: pain, loss and discovery. In: *Who am I? Experiences of donor conception*. Leamington Spa: Idreos Education Trust.

Kass LR (2002) *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The challenge for bioethics*. San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books.

Kirk HD and McDaniel SA (1984) Adoption policy in Great Britain and North America. *Journal of Social Policy* 13(1): 75–84.

Lasker JN (1998) The users of donor insemination. In: Daniels KR and Haimes E (eds) *International Social Science Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lopez KA and Willis DG (2004) Descriptive versus interpretive phenomenology: their contributions to nursing knowledge. *Qualitative Health Research* 14(5): 726–735.

Lorbach C (2003) *Experiences of Donor Conception: Parents, offspring, and donors throughout the years*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Marshall A and McDonald M (2001) *The Many-sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia*. Melbourne, VIC: Melbourne University Press.

McWhinnie DA (2006) Afterword. In: *Who am I? Experiences of donor conception*. Leamington Spa: Idreos Education Trust.

Nelson HL (2001) *Damaged Identities: Narrative repair*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.

NHMRC (undated) *Ethical Guidelines on the Use of Assisted Reproductive Technology in Clinical Practice and Research*. National Health and Medical Research Council. Available at: www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/e78.

O'Shaughnessy T (1994) *Adoption, Social Work and Social Theory*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Passmore N, Feeney J and Foulstone A (2007) Secrecy within adoptive families and its impact on adult adoptees. *Family Relationships Quarterly* 5: 3–5.

Passmore N, Foulstone AR and Feeney JA (2006) Openness and secrecy in adoptive families and possible effects on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees. In: Wilkinson RB and Pearce Z

(eds) *Relationships Near and Far: Proceedings of the APS Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 6th Annual Conference*. Melbourne, VIC: Australian Psychological Society.
Perl L and Markham S (1999) *'Why wasn't I told?' Making sense of the late discovery of adoption*. Paddington, NSW: The Benevolent Society of New South Wales.
Riggs DW and Scholz B (2011) The value and meaning attached to genetic relatedness among Australian sperm donors. *New Genetics and Society* 30(1): 41–58.
Riley HJ (2008) The late discovery of adoptive status. *Family Relationships Quarterly* 7: 17–21.
Riley HJ (2009) Listening to late discovery adoption and donor offspring stories: adoption, ethics and implications for contemporary donor-insemination practices. In: Spark C and Cuthbert D (eds) *Other People's Children: Adoption in Australia*. Melbourne, VIC: Australian Scholarly Publishing.
Rose J (2009) *A critical analysis of sperm donation practices: the personal and social effects of disrupting the unity of biological and social relatedness for the offspring*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Humanities Programme, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.
Salter-Ling N, Hunter M and Glover L (2001) Donor insemination: exploring the experience of treatment and intention to tell. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 19: 175–186.
Schwandt TA (2007) *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Somerville M (2004) *The Ethical Canary: Science, society and the human spirit*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Sorosky AD, Baran A and Pannor R (1978) *The Adoption Triangle: The effects of the sealed record on adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.
Spencer LW (2007) *Sperm Donor Offspring: Identity and other experiences*. Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing.
Taylor C (1994) *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Taylor C (1995) The dialogical self. In: Goodman RF and Fisher WR (eds) *Rethinking Knowledge: Reflections across the disciplines*. Albany, NY: Albany State University of New York Press.
The Senate (Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee) (2011) *Inquiry into Donor Conception in Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
Triseliotis J (1973) *In Search of Origins: The experience of adopted people*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Turner AJ and Coyle A (2000) What does it mean to be a donor offspring? The identity experiences of adults conceived by donor insemination and the implications for counselling and therapy. *Human Reproduction* 15(9): 2041–2051.
van den Akker O (2006) A review of family donor constructs: current research and future directions. *Human Reproduction Update* 12: 91–101.
van Keppel M, Midford S and Cicchini M (1987) The experience of loss in adoption. Presented at the *5th Conference, National Association for Loss and Grief*, Fremantle, WA, Australia.
Walker MU (2006) *Moral Repair: Reconstructing moral relations after wrongdoing*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
Walker MU (2007) *Moral Understandings: A feminist study in ethics* 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Whipp C (2006) Worrying the wound: the hidden scars of donor conception'. In: *Who am I? Experiences of donor conception*. Leamington Spa: Idreos Education Trust.
Winston R (2006) *A Child Against All Odds*. London: Bantam Press.

Helen Riley PhD is a Visiting Researcher, School of Law/Humanities Programme, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Helen is a late discoverer of adoptive status herself who was told she was adopted by neighbours when she was 21 years of age.